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SUBJECT: SUSTAINABLE INTEGRATED WATER RESOURCES AND WASTEWATER
MANAGEMENT (IWRM) FOR PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

¶1. Summary: The Regional Environmental Specialist (RES) from Embassy Suva's Pacific Environmental Hub attended a week-long meeting on the GEF-supported Sustainable Integrated Water Resources and Wastewater Management (IWRM) Project in Nadi, Fiji, from April 23 to 27. IWRM is a new idea in the Pacific, and interest has been driven by the availability of donor funding. Nevertheless, participants showed enthusiasm for the project and recognized its potential. They also expressed frustration with the GEF process and the difficulty in accessing GEF funds. Many countries are behind the curve in identifying co-financers for their country projects, a GEF requirement that might cause some countries to fall out of this regional initiative. Despite this obstacle, IWRM presents significant opportunities for small, vulnerable Pacific island nations, and the donor community, to expand access to clean water, safeguard biodiversity, and support climate change adaptation activities. End summary.

¶2. The South Pacific Geosciences Commission (SOPAC) organized this meeting with funding from the GEF to informally assess national diagnostic reports and hotspot analysis from the Pacific island countries (PICs) it supports. Late last year, SOPAC requested these reports from countries as part of its effort to design a full scale regional IWRM demonstration project proposal for GEF funding. The overall value of the project could reach 10.4 million USD, with individual country components receiving up to 500,000 in GEF funding.

Participation

¶3. Meeting participants included IWRM country focal points and Pacific Adaptation to Climate Change Project country focal points from 14 PICs and French Polynesia. (The involvement of both sets of focal points promoted synergies between these two GEF-supported activities.) Embassy Suva-based RES Sandeep K Singh, a locally recognized expert on wastewater management, was invited to participate in the meeting as a resource person, along with UNDP, UNEP, and IUCN representatives, and staff from the South Pacific Regional Environmental Program (SPREP). Other participants included NGOs and private consulting firms working in the Pacific on water issues.

Overview

14. Meeting sessions included presentations, working groups and discussions on the IWRM, which is a systematic process for the sustainable development, allocation and monitoring of water resource use to enhance integration of social, economic and environmental objectives. Although the idea is relatively new in the Pacific Region, it has been extensively tried out in the greater Caribbean through the White Water to the Blue Water Initiative, in which the USG is a partner. Some PIC participants showed confusion about the IWRM concept, despite being part of the project for nearly a year.

15. Countries' diagnostic reports and hotspot analysis highlighted that many PICs have very limited fresh water resources; what little water they do have is often contaminated through poor wastewater management. Small Island countries like Tuvalu, Kiribati and Niue are dependent on ground and rainwater. The reports and discussion also pointed to pollution of ground water as a real threat to PICs, especially to small atoll countries. Once ground water systems are contaminated, it is difficult and costly to clean them up. (Poor water quality can also result from salt water intrusion from coastal zones, which can be exacerbated by extraction at unsustainable rates.) In addition, reports from Fiji, Samoa, PNG and the Cook Islands discussed how poor watershed management has led to degradation of coastal resources, particularly coral reefs.

16. The participants recognized that poor wastewater management threatens PICs vital fresh water systems and near-shore marine resources and that the IWRM project offers an opportunity to introduce best-practices to the region to counter this threat. Despite participants' recognition of the opportunity, however, many

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were obviously overwhelmed by the prospects of securing required co-financing for the country components of the project and of complying with the bureaucratic requirements of accessing GEF funding over the next 3-4 months before the looming application deadline.

17. Participants complained that, while the Caribbean has significant donor support to implement the IWRM concept, including a 3.5 million dollar total U.S. commitment to White Water to Blue Water since 2002, PICs have come late to the party and are struggling to engage the donor community. SOPAC pointed out that the EU, through the next phase of its assistance program for the Pacific (EDF 9, which starts mid-year), has pledged 3.4 million Euros for drought resilience projects in PICs. Some of this funding could serve as possible co-financing for IWRM, since the EU is encouraging PICs to make possible linkages between EU-funded programs and other assistance efforts. (Recognizing that some of the demonstration projects are in high biodiversity areas, the IUCN representative suggested additional linkages to countries' National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plans under the Convention on Biological Diversity and to the Ramsar Convention.)

18. Comment: The IWRM concept is relatively new to the Pacific and has not been employed here in a systematic manner. GEF support could help to bring that about. Despite being driven by the availability of GEF funding, most PIC representatives at the event showed real enthusiasm for the IWRM approach and embraced the opportunity it represents for better integration of water sectors and for promoting good governance and sound environmental management. Lack of familiarity with the concept, poor forward planning, difficulties identifying co-financing, and a profound lack of government capacity may, however, result in this opportunity being lost for some PICs and for donors looking for a vehicle to address the region's pressing water needs. End comment.